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ABSTRACT

A collaborative inquiry project illustrates moments when English teacher educators questioned literacy instructional practices that had become normative and acceptable within the schools and communities where their student teachers worked--practices that the teacher educators believed adversely affected the literacy growth of students in the student teachers' English classrooms. Data consisted of narrative reflections on teacher practice collected in the form of conversational letters exchanged among three English teacher educators once a week for a period of one academic semester. The over 300 pages of data were collaboratively and inductively coded for themes, and from those themes, each teacher educator wrote one case to illustrate both the effect of the project on the teacher educators' work and the reflective process in which they collaboratively engaged. They functioned as "positive irritants" to one another--they forced each other to describe their teaching, to articulate tensions and concerns, and to reach out for advice. They also supported student teachers as they started to see how the sociopolitical structures of the schools and communities in which they taught had limited their thinking about what was possible in their practices. (Contains 37 references.) (RS)

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What Difference Does Community Context Make in Challenging School Literacy Instructional Traditions?

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Our Instructional Dilemma:

We have found that our student teachers who are exposed to the notion that literacy practices are culturally-mediated and that students' ethnic and social identities matter in how they value literacy experiences (Ferdman, 1990; Gee ,1991; Heath and Mangiola ,1991) have difficulty acting on these theories in English classrooms. While they seem to exit our methods classes with an articulate understanding of these literacy theories and a range of possible accompanying practices from which to draw, they often do not engage in these practices in their work in schools. In this collaborative action research project, we construct a possible theory to explain this problem and describe the ways we attempted to address this issue in our practices as English educators serving three communities that differed substantially socioeconomically and racial/ethnically.

When we began this project, we seemed to agree that certain practices--such as authentic writing assignments, literary reflective response techniques, collaborative writing, peer review and community-based literacy projects-- constituted "good" literacy instruction. We differed, however, in the ways we felt we could approach talking to our students about teaching in these ways in the school communities in which we worked with our student teachers. In our conversations with each other, we compared instructional methods and accepted literacy learning experiences of the schools in which we placed student teachers. We began to realize that the social, ethnic, racial, economic, and political structures of the communities served by the schools influenced how and what our student teachers felt comfortable teaching. We also began to realize how *we* often felt uncomfortable addressing certain issues of practice because of the community expectations and the accepted practices of the schools in which we placed our student teachers. We too broadly addressed *how* these practices need to be interpreted within the value systems and the political structures of the various ethnic and socioeconomic communities served by a school. This dilemma of our own teaching practice became apparent to us as we talked about our various students and the schools in which we worked with them.

Through these conversations, we came to the conclusion that we needed to better support our student teachers as they interpreted the practices accepted in their fieldsite schools and as they worked to know their students as socially and politically situated. Just as our student teachers needed support in reinterpreting accepted practices, we felt we did as well. We designed a collaborative inquiry project toward these ends. In this study, we illustrate moments when we questioned literacy instructional practices that had become normative and acceptable within the schools and communities where our student teachers worked, but that we believed adversely affected the literacy growth of students in our student teachers' English classrooms. Specifically, we were guided by the following questions:

1. What possibilities and limitations do we see in our practice as teacher educators--in our courses and in our supervision-- in addressing the sociopolitical values of particular communities and how these shape literacy instruction?

2. What can we learn from collaborative inquiry as we challenge our own practices?

The Theory that Guided Our Understanding of Our Instructional Dilemma:

Historically, teacher education has been mired in the assumptions of the training perspective. Within this tradition, "good" teaching is nothing more than applying good methods or instructional "moves." The community, institutional/school, or life context of the teacher and her students does not hold implications for which methods apply where, when, and how. Teaching, as it is defined in this tradition, does not include uncovering and addressing: (1) the sociopolitical context of instructional decisions, (2) the demystification of the power relationships between teachers and learners, (3) or between learners themselves and the various power positions they hold within school culture, (4) or the community the school serves and the sociopolitical position it holds within the larger American society. Teaching nor teacher education are traditionally viewed as having moral dimensions or political consequences. We believe that this culturally sanitized and depolitical view of teaching that permeates most teacher education experiences (Liston and Zeichner, 1991) contributes to the perpetuation of decontextualized and depersonalized approaches to literacy instruction.

Yet, multicultural teacher educators and instructional theorists challenge us who work to prepare teachers for student populations whose knowledge, interests, and experiences have not been traditionally valued within school cultures--specifically students of color from low socioeconomic groups-- to engage in critical reflection on the political and social values supported by accepted literacy teaching practices within particular communities (Delpit, 1992; Edelsky, 1991; Gomez, 199; Ladson-Billings, 1992). We also believe that addressing the social and political positions of students within various school communities is a step toward making schools more tenable places for literacy learning. The work in literacy education done by Freire and Macedo (1988), Willinsky (1990), and Toten (1992) has inspired us to recognize how power is acquired in various communities through particular literacy practices. This work has helped us see how our *classroom* literacy communities can either mirror socio-political inequities or model possible transformations of power through alternative literacy instructional practices. All of this work suggests to us that cultural issues should be forefronted in our discussions about literacy

instructional design. In this research project, we attempt to do this with our student teachers in our work as their instructors and supervisors.

At this, the beginning of our careers as English educators, we have taken the challenge of addressing political and ethical issues of literacy instruction seriously. We have found that these dimensions of practice are context specific and culturally embedded. In other words, to address ethics and the political consequences of certain practices, teachers must be able to observe and analyze school and community cultures in which they work. What is considered to be progress toward more "ethical" or "democratic" literacy practice in one school or community might differ substantially from another. We have found the research literature lacking in providing specific examples of *how* to address these issues as English educators.

Most importantly, this study illustrates another phase for us in our lifelong process of coming to know ourselves as teachers. In this study, we work to further define ourselves politically and theoretically. We believe this process is not only educative to us but could potentially serve to inspire other teacher educators to engage in similar projects.

Methodology

In designing this study, we draw on the work of feminist researchers who actively work with teachers to help them articulate problems related to equity issues in their practice and to work collectively to make changes in schools (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1994; Hulsebosh and Koerner, 1993; Miller, 1990). These studies have helped us understand the importance of collaboration to sustain reflection-on-action (Schon, 1991) and inquiry that is simultaneously personal and social and results in both individual and institutional renewal and change. This body of work has also highlighted for us an awareness of how "who we are" changes in relation to "where we are," how our personal commitments are often shaped by the possibilities and the constraints of the social and political contexts in which we do our work as teachers.

It is our intent in this study to focus on our own practice toward a collective understanding of changes necessary in teacher education to better address equity issues within particular communities in the practice of literacy education. By drawing attention to the conditions and structures which influence our day-to-day decisions as teacher educators and those of our student teachers, we are involved in the postmodern project of challenging and changing those circumstances through the process of research.

Data Source and Analysis

Data for this project consisted of narrative reflections on our practice collected in the form of conversational letters (See Hollingsworth and Miller, 1994; Knowles and Cole, 1994 for examples of this form) exchanged once a week for a period of one academic semester. We engaged in ongoing analysis of the letters within the letters themselves. At the conclusion of the letter writing, we read a total of over 300 pages of data and collaboratively and inductively coded for themes. From the themes, we each wrote one case to illustrate both the effect of this project on our work and the reflective process in which we collectively engaged.

In our letters, we constantly told stories from our lives, our high school teaching experiences, our experiences as supervisors and teacher educators. The purpose of these exchanges of stories was to help one another see each other's dilemmas of practice from fresh angles. Our stories became embedded in each other and in doing so both supported and challenged us. We analyzed these stories to illustrate how we considered alternatives, asked questions of our practice, and uncovered assumptions that guided our practices. In the individual cases we present, we tried to preserve the exchange of stories without confusing the reader.

We chose this form of data collection because we believed it forced us to face ourselves--our own values, commitments, beliefs--in a way that allowed us to first identify them through the articulation process offered in all journaling or personal letter writing. But we were interested in more than naming our value systems. As LeCompte (1994) reminded us in her critique of narrative research, self-awareness alone is not sufficient to bring about empowerment. We believed we also engaged in collaborative critique on our teaching so that we could act to change our practices in ways that better articulated our social and political concerns for literacy instruction in schools.

We recognized that this form of data collection and analysis was experimental. Yet, we have found our letter-writing process wedded to the tradition of ethnographic journals.We believe the cycle of questioning, self-observation, and collective on-going analysis is similar to that recommended by action researchers (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Our study was designed so that analysis was dependent on the collective. No one of us was able to recognize how she was shaped by the context of her work without seeing herself in relation to the other two participants. So while we are tilling new ground in this study from a methodological perspective, we believe our research practices to be tied to qualitative and ethnographic research traditions.

Data Presentation

In the following section, we present three case studies demonstrating (1) the instructional practices we engaged in both in the classroom and in the field, (2) the tensions and concerns we

had about the effects of our practices, and (3) the effect that our collaborative study had on our perspective on our practices, on our students, and, most importantly, on clarifying our instructional goals. While grounded in similar beliefs about the importance of attending to students' ethnic communities and social identities in effective literacy instruction, the three cases differ in the particular instructional tensions we faced, the possibilities and limitations we felt in how we could teach based both on the school communities in which our students taught and on our students' sources of commitment to literacy teaching born from their own educational and social experience.

Dawn's Story: Uncovering the Power of Community Values: A Case of Teaching about Multicultural Literature Instruction in the Suburbs

I teach in a small liberal arts teacher education program in the northern suburbs of Chicago. The schools in which my student teachers work serve some of the most affluent suburban communities in the country. These communities are mostly European-American in ethnicity. People move to these communities to avoid urban school "problems." Most of the parents in these communities grew up and were educated in well-heeled suburban schools. My student teachers are European-American and have been educated in the suburban public schools or in private schools. Most believe they want to teach in communities and in schools similar to the ones they have experienced.

I started this, my second year as a teacher educator in this program, sure of my political convictions, the need to work toward a just and equitable social and educational system, and less sure about the processes involved in helping my students view curriculum and instructional practices as having social, ethical, and political effects. Ironically, my student teachers--once I started really listening to them through the encouragement of my coresearchers in this study -- taught me about the importance of recognizing *their* literacy values based on their socioeconomic and racial identities. In the following case, unlike my colleagues' stories which follow, I will focus on a cohort of student teachers who taught me a great deal about the tensions of articulating an explicitly political teaching agenda as an English teacher in the suburbs. Specifically, I will ground my illustration in discussions about the teaching of multicultural literature.

My students tried to tell me that they believed political teaching or teaching from a social and cultural perspective was really for urban teaching where schools served large populations of students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The following excerpt from a letter to Helen and Pat illustrates some of the tensions my students and I experienced with my explicit political framework for teaching English:

> In methods class yesterday, I was talking about (ok, doing a little lecturing) on learning theories. I talked about the differences between constructivism, social constructivism, and social reconstructionism from the perspective of what contributes to learning and questions teachers should ask themselves as they plan via each perspective. (We read some of Linda Christensen's (1992) and Ira Shor's (1980) work detailing aspects of their sociopolitical approaches to literature instruction).
>
> One of my students, Ann, raised her hand and said (when I got through with social reconstructionism), "What do administrators think of teachers who teach from that perspective? Is that pretty typical in schools? Or is it more typical in urban settings?"
>
> Well, I had to admit that it isn't very prevalent in schools and, indeed, you are more likely to see it in urban settings. But I asked her why she thought that might be so.
>
> She thought that the overtly political message fit the "imperative" of the urban community. That people in urban settings were more conscious of the political frameworks in which their lives were embedded so it made sense to take up this perspective there.
>
> Ok. Long pause. I said something about how suburban and rural communities needed just as desperately to be politically awakened. But, I had to admit that it sounded hollow even to me. I haven't sorted all of this out yet. But I know it didn't feel right. I don't want to say that social reconstructionism is only for the city...I know that isn't right. But I also know that raising political consciousness in other areas is not only dangerous business at times (as James Moffett, 1988, found out in his censorship battles), it can also be disheartening. I worry about frustrating young, enthusiastic teachers so early in their careers (10/4/95).

My students tended to accept status quo teaching in schools as "good." They don't come to my methods classes with a desire to change the ways in which schools teach nor do they question whom the schools are serving well. In other words, they have not developed a basis--either through their own educational experiences or through their studies--for sociopolitical critique of curricula and instructional practices. They want to teach in the ways they themselves were taught. And they don't really understand why these forms of curricular and instructional practices are problematic for anyone--no matter their backgrounds or experiences. They were successful in traditional schools; they want to replicate their educational experience for others.

At first, I found my most major responsibility to be uncovering and working to dispel popular dominant cultural mythologies about both urban and suburban families, community life, and teaching practices. I shared these concerns with Helen and Pat in my letters:

> Notice Katy's comment on the second to last page, "I personally don't think gangs will happen in communities like I teach in. The parents care too much about their community to let that happen. Also note my response, "Whoa. Be careful. What

> do you mean "care too much? They let their kids get involved in other horrendous things like binge drinking and experimentation with drugs. The suburbs aren't pristine places as I am sure you know. Problems with violence of different forms--including rape, cliques fighting one another, violence against gay and lesbian teens occur in the suburbs. I taught in the suburbs. It can get ugly there too."
>
> I realize now that this was another one of those tip of the iceberg responses. I get so overwhelmed by comments such as these. I don't even know where the best place is to begin. What do I do?
>
> She writes earlier in her journal how students' understanding of other races is limited by their lack of direct experience, exposure. She is in the same camp.
>
> How do I tell her that parents in the city care about their kids and their communities too without sounding hollow and just confrontational? All she is going to say is Yea, sure. And write me off as being politically correct. Pat, I need one of your effective questions here. Or do I need a story? I am at a loss (10/4/95).

At this point in the semester, I began to feel overexposed--as if I had been "caught" with my political agenda showing too many times. Students started to view my focus on multicultural curricula and practices as being "my thing." In other words, they accepted that this was my particular focus, but they didn't really engage in this process of sociopolitical critique to understand the values and behaviors of students and families from various communities. This was "my thing," not our project. Certainly, I am not the first educator to feel this tension. (Ahlquist,1991; Bauer, 1990; Ellsworth, 1992). At this point in the semester, as I wrote in my letters to Pat and Helen, I felt like a missionary rather than a collaborator for literacy instruction in school that supported social change.

My students also told me in many different ways throughout the semester that they felt essentially unprepared to teach students of color because of their own white, middle-class cultural backgrounds. They felt it best to leave urban teaching to teachers of color because "they" could understand the community lives of "these" students better.

I was encouraged by Helen and Pat to move toward discussion of particular practices and their effects on students in the communities where my students were teaching. I tried to move away from theorizing and--as my students thought of it--"preaching" about the benefits of teaching from an explicitly political position.

When we started to discuss the particular practice of multicultural literature instruction, both their concerns and mine surfaced poignantly. Their own academic preparation had not included study of multicultural texts or culturally informed interpretive theories. And certainly their own education within suburban schools had not prepared them with a pool of learning experiences from which to draw for instructional methods. They were receptive to my critique of the traditional

literary canon taught in most high school college preparatory courses because they had been educated to "respect" multiethnic literature even though they were not exposed to a great deal of it in their schooling experiences.

Meanwhile, in our letter exchanges, Pat and Helen questioned me on whether teaching "multiculturally" was really that different from the teaching practices that everyone in the English education community would label as "good." In thinking about this question, I was led to another discovery about my students:

> I had a Native American literature expert into class. She talked about topics we had already covered in other ways--the need to teach holistically, need to engage in both written and oral communication study, the need to draw on the students' community lives (in this case the respect for knowledge of elders in most native cultures), alternative and collaborative assessment, etc. It became obvious that everything she had to say could be applied to all kids. In fact, these were good cross-cultural teaching techniques. But it also became apparent that these are still considered subversive within the schools where they teach.
>
> After this seminar, my students talked about how overwhelmed they felt, how responsible they felt for knowing more than they could possibly know. They wanted to know how I would go about judging a text worthy to be taught. I talked about having basically two criteria--is it good literature and will it broaden and enrich students' experiences.
>
> I talked about books I have enjoyed teaching over the years (in communities similar to the ones they were teaching in)--*Woman Warrior, Black Boy, Beans of Egypt Maine, Huckleberry Finn, Color Purple, Their Eyes Were Watching God.* And how I would now relish the opportunity to teach a book like *Beloved.*
>
> They just gave me a tired look. Like how are we going to become knowledgeable about all this. I told them that you learn (and read widely) throughout your career. You have to make up your mind that you will engage in this kind of reading and broaden your own experience too. That's part of the deal. That's part of becoming a teacher.
>
> At first, I felt guilty about how tired they looked. Here, I go again making this profession seem impossible. But I can't help thinking about the kids--of all colors, including white--who will be depending on them to make their reading experiences worthwhile--especially white kids who need to be exposed to other social viewpoints through good literature, not just the tv and movie screens. It is tiring--teaching--if we do it right. It is also exhilarating and personally challenging and exciting when we teach from this perspective. Otherwise, we wouldn't still be doing it. Right? (11/08/94).

As I shared personal teaching examples as a former white teacher from the suburbs--something I was encouraged to do in my letter responses from Helen and Pat--my students started

to see the connections they needed to make between their own social, ethnic and school histories and those of their students.

Ann, for example, shared in seminar how she could hold a discussion about *Beloved* in an all-white classroom and have it be an educational experience, although, in her words, "probably not as rich" of a discussion as she could have in a culturally integrated literature class. After midterm, Ann started to write a literature unit on "Becoming an American" using selections representing voluntary and involuntary immigrant groups.

Katy started to wonder if her middle school students were so disengaged because the literature they were reading (mostly short stories from *Read* and*Scope* magazine) did not help them understand themselves or their role in society. Katy investigated her school library and found basically no multicultural literature selections. She started to question librarians, teachers, and school administrators about this. She found that parents were basically uninformed about what their children were reading at school, and she started to formulate a plan for engaging parents in the process of "multiculturalizing" the library and literature curriculum.

Paige defended a student's use of black dialect in a writing assignment to her cooperating teacher. The assignment was to write a persuasive essay in preparation for the statewide writing exam. Paige's student wrote a letter to his little sister trying to persuade her to do her math homework by convincing her that the study of math was important to her future. He chose to use mostly Black English language forms. After a class discussion, Paige decided to explain to her student that his choice of language fit his purposes. For the next assignment in the class, Paige convinced her cooperating teacher to have students do the same essay but change the audience. This gave Paige an opportunity to have her student practice standard English as well.

As my student teachers engaged in these various projects, I questioned my right to encourage them in these political struggles knowing the risks involved in ways they have yet to experience. As I celebrated Ann's choice of literature unit topics, I couldn't disregard the fear in her earlier comments about administrative support for this kind of curriculum. And while I was proud of Katy's drive to take action in her school community, I couldn't forget the concern in Katy's remarks about the parent community at her school as having a history of not supporting "nontraditional" teaching methods. Finally, while I supported Paige's interpretation of her student's use of dialect, I am cognizant of the fact that the majority of the members of her English department hold singular and universal standards for expertise in the technical aspects of "good" writing and feel supported by the majority of the parent community in doing so

I needed to stop seeing my student teachers as politically and culturally deficient in order to move from "preaching" to collaboration. But, even as they began to own "my project" as "our

project," I still questioned my role in their actions. I still wondered if they would be able to work willingly and happily within their schools and the communities they serve. I guess, if I am truly honest, I sometimes question if the role of "teacher as social change agent" carries unfair expectations for these new teachers.

Pat's Story: A Student Teacher's Discovery of her Cultural Identity: Learning to Teach English in a Ethnically Diverse Community

At the time of this study, I was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison writing my dissertation. When a temporary position as a full-time faculty/supervisor at the Urban Education Program (UEP) in Chicago became a possibility, I accepted the opportunity. UEP offers prospective teachers from 14 liberal arts colleges the option to student teach in an urban setting. While in the program, the students live together in a dormitory-style building in a north Chicago area considered to be one of the most ethnically diverse in the city. Through group neighborhood walks, students experience mingling and shopping in places where English is rarely seen or spoken. On weekends throughout the semester, students continue to experience innumerable ethnic restaurants, museums, churches, and community/cultural events.

Program expectations are high. Student teaching observations occur every seven to ten days. In addition to lesson and unit plan preparations, students keep a journal, write reports after attending several school organizational meetings, write reflective narratives on cultural excursions, and attend weekly seminars. At the seminars, different teachers and community members present topics from cooperative learning to Euro-Indian culture to gangs and violence. Prior to seminar meetings, each supervisor meets with her student teachers in a supervisory group. The pace is intense. The underlying concept of the program is that pleasurable cultural immersion will inspire both a respect for various ethnic lifestyles and values and a sense of political purpose in the creation of curriculum and instructional practices that are culturally based.

For me, UEP's philosophy seemed to give my personal philosophy license. The program's goals are direct: 1) Education is a political act, 2) teaching is empowerment, 3) teaching is a collaborative act, 4) teaching and learning imply the integration of action and thought, and 5) education is enhanced by cultural pluralism. I enthusiastically wrote to Helen and Dawn as if I had found a teaching Utopia--the right philosophy and students who had *chosen* to teach in one of the most diverse cities in the country. I made the assumption that their choice to teach in the city was an illustration of their readiness to embrace the role that cultural identity can play in the literacy practices of their students. I also expected them to view this student teaching experience as an

opportunity for personal examination as they expanded their own educational experiences. I thought they would be receptive to constructing new curricular options shaped by their understandings of urban and ethnically diverse students. My education and a lifetime of reflection about cultural diversity in my personal and professional lives led me to think I was ready to help the predominantly Euro-American, middle-classed student teachers at UEP to teach multiculturally. If nothing else, I knew I could model the process of coming to understand curriculum from a cultural perspective. I found that it is far easier to build students' cultural self-awareness in seminars in college classrooms far removed from the particular tensions of improving literacy instructional practice. I did not have strategies initially for addressing the cultural dissonance that can occur when white teachers learn how to teach in multicultural communities *while* focusing on issues of practice in my supervision.

Elissa was one of seven student teachers in my group: white, 22 years old, grew up in a white suburb adjacent to Chicago, attended a private college in another state, and was now returning home to teach both English and math. However, her suburban life experiences had not prepared her for an Euroamerican, African-American, Pakistani, Indian, and Arabic student body.

I shared my early impression of Elissa with Dawn and Helen:

> [In my supervisory group] last week I asked each of my seven to tell a short story about a student in their classroom. I think this reveals how each student teacher thinks about students, how comfortable/uncomfortable they are at this point, what they see as important.
>
> Elissa told a story about a boy from the Caribbean who didn't want to write in his journal and asked her if he could draw. She described his elaborate comic strip story about a character called "Goodman" that addressed some ethical issues in society. She said to our group, "I thought it was neat that he found another way to express himself." I said, "It also says something about a teaching philosophy in your room."No responses. I asked the group, " What would have happened to this boy if Elissa had said, 'This is a writing class, not an art class'?" Some made the connection (9/18/94).

Her story sent me several messages: 1) Elissa will be flexible with assignments if the alternative appears to accomplish quality learning; 2) she seems comfortable with differences in student interests and/or abilities; and 3) she seems sensitive to possible cultural or learning preferences; and 4) her noting the ethical content in the comic drawings suggests a socio-political awareness about texts. Because the student teachers were placed all over the city, each had been sharing with the seminar participants the ethnic makeup of their school's culture. Elissa's description of her student as Caribbean did not stand out in this exchange as an unusual marker.

Within a few weeks, however, I began to feel a resistance from Elissa as she avoided

scheduling an observation visit. Since Elissa was not taking the initiative, I did. She hedged, appeared somewhat frazzled, but made promises to talk with her cooperating teachers about a specific observation date. Her lesson plans, methods course work, journal, and other program assignments were becoming consistently late, some non-existent. Because she was pleasant and had fairly reasonable excuses, I decided that she must be disorganized or adjusting to the new pace of concurrent teaching and studenthood.

One of her writings did suggest other reasons, which I shared in my letter to Dawn and Helen:

> Elissa is frustrated with our UEP expectations. In talking with her this week, I hear her complete attachment to her cooperating teacher and her wanting to hide from the program's interference, except that she states she knows "the program is good and wants to help, and I am learning a lot from the seminars and everything. But if I were at (my university) I'm sure I would be able to devote more time to my classroom and my cooperating teacher." I responded with why I feel that the "university voice" is important, that I ask different questions as an outside teacher presence, as a voice that can be separate from the daily and let us look at the larger picture--the "change agent" philosophy.. She said she could see that but would still like to be left alone with her cooperating teachers to get used to teaching.... I hear where she is and can understand that. But I won't let her be comfortable with it (10/15/94).

My rhetoric about being a change agent who raises questions about inequitable practices or practices that do not recognize the cultural identities of students as important, flow freely during our conversation at my office. But the rhetoric about "different questions as an outsider" means nothing to a student teacher who is struggling every day with classroom control issues and who is finding it impossible to inspire her students to write and to read.

On my first visit to Elissa's math class, I watched her begin her lesson with a 10-minute warmup to help students focus, an all-school procedural policy. With a math problem already written on the board, she stood off to the side at the front of the room, her facial expression firm, and repeatedly told her students that they should quiet down, get started on the problem, stop talking, and so on. By the time she worked the problem on the overhead projector, I did not see many students who were "warmed up" or involved with the work.

During the post-observation time, we worked hard. I usually start conferences with a *How do you think it went?* question. She knew something was wrong but could not identify why students were not focusing during the warmup, not listening well to her explanation of new material, and only getting to work for the last 15-20 minutes of class. I returned to the warmup. I gave her a few specific suggestions on how to make students feel accountable for the warmup

problem and then told her to adjust my specifics into her curricula and for her students. She agreed to work on it.

On my next visit, I observed the 10-minute warmup exercise in her English class: DOL or Daily Oral Language (an incorrect sentence from the DOL text is written on the board, copied down and corrected by each student in to a notebook, and then group corrected on the board as volunteers raise hands). Again I watched her students waste time getting out their notebooks, talking to friends, some never getting to the actual work of sentence repairing before Elissa led a large group, step by step correction with the few who were responding. Our effort toward improving the math warmup was not translating into her English classroom. My own frustration with DOL as a decontectualized way to remedy writing mechanics and usage errors was eroding my usual patience with letting a student teacher discover her own dilemmas. In our post-observation talk, I began strongly:

> Could this warmup be shortened? Did she notice that most were finished when she was still roaming the room looking at their work? I was cruel. I asked her if she thought she could do the DOL in seven minutes; she said probably. I multiplied the deducted 3 minutes X 180 school days out on a piece of paper, did some division, and asked her to think about wasting 9 hours of the school year just on this long warmup. I use guilt trips when applicable. Did I tell you that? (11/6/94)

I struggled between my frustration over wasted learning time and the appearance of simply questioning the school's warmup policy. The concept of the warmup was not the problem. I needed to find a better way to help Elissa learn to make her own practice judgement calls through a better understanding of the lens of her students. She needed to understand why and how the DOL practice might be related to students' inattention. I asked her if she had to use the DOL text. Could she use sentences taken anonymously from student papers? She would ask her cooperating teacher.

We continued to talk about the importance of connecting the warmup to writing improvement. I suggested that she value student writing by giving their sentences blackboard status rather than the DOL textbook sentences. With prodding, she began to see the difference between generalized sentence correction and the specificity of student-generated sentences that would address common writing problems that her students were having.

On my next visit, I learned from indirect student comments that the two warmup sentences on the board were from student papers. All but two or three students were ready in a few minutes to do the group correction. A lot of hands were waving. One student even asked if he could "go first" tomorrow. Student ownership appeared to be developing. Following the warmup, she

began the lesson on the 5-paragraph essay, a topic chosen by her cooperating teacher and a method out of departmental policy.

With a 4x5 foot poster-paper rendition of a hamburger covering one end of the blackboard, Elissa referred to the paper burger as she spoke about how to write an essay. The assignment: Nominate a favorite relative for relative of the year. The paper needed to include an introduction (top hamburger bun), three paragraphs to describe an attribute each (lettuce, tomato, and hamburger), and a conclusion (bottom bun). Her instructional emphasis remained on the form: the topic sentences, the support statements, the number of supports needed. She seemed to have forgotten about subject, audience, and the message one is trying to communicate. In her presentation, the favorite relatives receded into the background.

As Elissa circulated to help students get started, I listened to their questions and her one-on-one responses, looking for my entry into disrupting once again the formulaic approach to writing taken as standard practice in this school community. Each student clearly had a story to tell, but each struggled with how to begin the introductory paragraph. Her attention to the writing structure and comparatively little attention to the subject matter gave me my opening for the post-observation discussion.

> We talked for at least an hour about this assignment and the warmup. I asked her: What is more important to you here? form or content? She said she wanted content but thought the teacher wanted both, "but for sure form." I asked more questions: What kind of writing do you expect to get from these papers? When you write, do you write your introduction first or last? What needs to be at the core of these essays? What will make them interesting? What will make your students want to write anything? (11/6/94).

She began to recognize that her students would not enjoy writing about their favorite relative if she continued to emphasize the essay structure more than the stories about their relatives. I then backed up to help her help her students who did not know how to begin writing.

> I told her about how I learned to help struggling students when I taught. Have them tell the stories first. As soon as they tell it, say, " Write down what you just said, just the way you told me." Then go away. Come back. Help them talk and write again until it sounds more like what they said. Then take those honest stories and fit them somehow into the form that the curriculum demands.
>
> We talked about when and why one might need to use the hamburger essay, about dominant cultural forms and expectations to succeed, and about different kinds of writing in a variety of places. I did suggest that she ask her students to tell her where the 5-paragraph form is used. The two of us couldn't think of too many places except school writing. We found that interesting. So I said talk about how

> it is used as a guide to get you started with essay writing. That felt productive. She is listening (11/6/94).

And I was listening to her. We seemed to have arrived at a different phase of our relationship during this exchange. As she began to seriously reflect on each of my questions, and as I waited for her to think and respond, it seemed evident that we were both primarily concerned about her students and their literacy learning process. We were problem solving, looking for ways to sustain school expectations for warmups, DOL, and 5-paragraph essays and at the same time generating strategies that engaged students in their own learning through writing. She seemed committed to teaching her students to become good writers, but I still felt that something was missing. I just could not identify that something.

I continued to think about why we as English teachers often foreground writing procedures and structures. We all need structure and scaffolding of various types at particular times for different reasons, yet Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1974) remind us that scaffolding is a process that supports only until proven unnecessary. It is the content of what we read, write and say that presents us with possibilities for seeing ourselves, our community, and the community of others through multiple perspectives. My line of thinking kept me focused on how Elissa taught writing instead of focusing on Elissa's relationships toward her students and to her growing understanding of the role of English teacher in this school community.

At her midterm conference with me and her cooperating teacher, Elissa shared what she called her major concern at this point: "I think I've been teaching to some kind of middle, and I'm not sure if any of our students are really there" (11/30/94). Mentioning specific student names to the teacher, she added, "It has really been bothering me because I don't understand their behavior and don't know how to respond to them" (11/30/94). The teacher started to give advice for how Elissa could strengthen her interactions with students and personalize her instructional approach. She asked Elissa to name the behaviors and the students, and then offered specific suggestions, such as "Duane just needs to know he's doing okay. Get right up next to him and let him see you smile. Natasha needs a soft voice, a touch on the shoulder. When I notice that Ronald seems angry, I just ask him how his day is going and let him tell me about it. Then he's ready to work." I had been telling Elissa that she needed to get away from the front of the room, mingle more, assume a position at individual desks that lets one look up into faces, but her cooperating teacher was gently helping her discover the importance of personally connecting with students. Until Elissa's admission of not knowing "how to respond to them," neither the cooperating teacher nor I had addressed her difficulty with class control as a teacher-student relationship issue. According to Elissa, she had not shared her concerns with her cooperating teacher earlier because she had been

afraid to say that her students made her feel inadequate. Saying it aloud to both of us at this conference was her way of coming to terms with herself as a teacher who could now risk making personal, caring connections with students as individuals as part of the learning process (Noddings, 1984, 1992).

When sharing this story in my letter to Helen and Dawn, I noted that Elissa's fears seemed to have no color lines. I made no connection between her concerns and a statement she had made in her journal about "feeling so white here (in the school and in the community)." I had categorized Elissa's problem as a typical student teacher problem of "connecting" to one's students. Dawn's response helped me recognize that becoming more comfortable with one's whiteness is complex and often has implications for relationships with students of color.

> I bet Elissa's feelings had a lot to do with her whiteness, probably in ways she couldn't quite articulate or admit to. Dealing with her own feelings of not connecting or liking certain kids, feeling at wits end with some of them, helped her work through her fears. But maybe her initial hesitation to deal with these feelings had a lot to do with how she felt "different" from them. I can't imagine my student teachers having any problem talking to their cooperating teacher about any student in their classes that they didn't understand--except the students of color. Notice Paige's story (Dawn's student) about the dialect problem and the African American student. At first she hesitated to share this with her cooperating teacher (or even with the seminar group). She had no problem sharing other stories about other students (12/15/94).

Without Dawn's comments, I would have underestimated Elissa's awakening process. I should have helped her articulate her struggle, but I did not see her "feeling very white here" as integral to finding her identity as a teacher in this particular school community. Part of my failure to help raise the issue came from my inability to recognize Elissa's stated reasons (too many UEP expectations, "teaching to some kind of middle," and not understanding "their" behavior) as an inability to think about and articulate her white racial identity. Because she was surrounded by students and teachers who were visibly racially identifiable, her own race and culture became uncomfortable for her. Frankenburg (1993) tells us that "once a person is in a landscape structured by racism, a conceptual mapping of race, of self and others, takes shape, following from and feeling the physical context" (p.69). When whites first encounter their own whiteness, a "cognitive dissonance" (Tatum, 1994) takes place, which translates into personal discomfort, an early recognition of privilege and guilt, and a desire to withdraw from the situation. When I read Dawn's comments about Elissa's whiteness and feeling different from her students, I heard echoes of what I had read earlier in Elissa's journal about "feeling so white here." I had missed the flag. Without feeling connected to her students, how could she demonstrate caring about what they say

in their writing, especially writing that had to do with their families and community-based values?

I was back in Elissa's English classroom about a week later. Her lesson plan was disrupted when an African American female student called out, "I want to read my favorite relative nomination in front of the whole class!" Elissa was visibly surprised at this show of writing pride, but she smiled and let it happen. The entire period was given over to public nominations for favorite relative of the year. Every story was rich with family relationships and ethnic traditions. Every paper was also a 5-paragraph hamburger, but the stories about the relatives who meant so much to each of these students gave the event a celebratory feeling.

Elissa stopped by my office later that day for our post-observation talk. She was so pleased with the essays and the way the class had evolved into a sharing session. We talked about how beautifully the stories had been written and read and how we felt emotionally moved by so many of them. She didn't once mention hamburgers or structures.

The semester ended; I felt we had just begun. This study helped me to recognize that issues of cultural dissonance need to be forefronted as I discuss literacy practice with white teachers in multicultural communities. Even though Elissa and her cooperating teacher ended the semester pleased with the progress Elissa had made, I felt dissatisfied. I felt like I had denied her a real learning opportunity--a chance to see why she had such difficulty valuing her students' stories and learning from them about herself.

Helen's Story: Discovering the Classism in Curricular Expectations in a Rural Community

Awareness of community context comes to me not only naturally, but framed in stark relief. The rural, white schools in which I supervised student teachers of English--often themselves from rural, white communities--could not be more different from those in which I myself was schooled, or those in which I have taught, or those for which I had been prepared to create social change. I struggled to understand the social landscape of rural communities and overcome my own limiting assumptions and expectations of my student teachers and the communities in which they taught. It was from Tina and her experience at Waitley that I learned the most about approaching community context and literacy learning as a critically oriented supervisor. Often my letters to Dawn and Pat explored issues that Tina's experience uncovered, and I will frequently quote from those letters.

My own institutional context becomes germane in Tina's story. I teach and supervise in the English department of a state university. At the time I worked with Tina, students took a two credit English methods course from me; the rest of their pre-service course work was in the School of

Education. Supervision of student teachers was the responsibility of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction which assigned one general supervisor to each student teacher. I was a content supervisor with little power or input in Tina's field experience; I was required only to visit each English student teacher once and send my report to the general supervisor at the end of the semester. Most often, no one from the School of Education consulted me about my observation or evaluation. My peripheral role as a supervisor is important as it determined my status with student teachers. My relative powerlessness created an atmosphere which allowed them to be absolutely candid with me; however, they did not feel compelled to care about issues I cared about, issues such as equity in literacy education.

From what I knew of the Waitley school district, I assumed I would find highly traditional literacy practices which would make it difficult for student teachers to adopt the more progressive curricular perspectives espoused in the English methods course. Our primary text was organized by perspectives on language, and we had spent some time discussing language as a social construct, an approach which uses "language to learn about the world in which the students live" (Gere et al., 1992, p. 185). Other of our course readings also supported critical literacy in which the teacher mediates "between students and the curriculum" (Kutz and Roskelly, 1991, p. 284) and "language mediates between the learner and the world" (p. 39). When we discussed literature, it was in terms of designing thematic units and activities that engaged students in personal reflection and critical analysis of particular texts rather than worksheets designed to help students master generalistic analytic devices. When we discussed writing instruction, we focused on expressive writing, collaborative and writing workshop methods of textual development rather than teaching methods which abstracted the study of writing structures from the meaning of the writing process as communicative event. Since Tina was an intern rather than a student teacher, and therefore did not have to follow a cooperating teacher's lead, I hoped she would create a curriculum reflective of literacy approaches we had discussed in class. On my first visit I asked Tina about objectives for her class. She had none.

> "We do vocab and DOL every day," (Daily Oral Language is the practice of starting a class with students correcting sentences full of mechanical problems). The implications are right there: You don't need objectives when you're doing something as self-evident as vocabulary and grammar...During vocab review, Tina said the word and the students cheerfully parroted back the meanings they had memorized (9/16/94).

I was disheartened. Rather than showing my distress over teaching that to my mind was not "best practice," I settled in to observe the class and fill out my forms without damaging Tina's self-

esteem or my relationship with he school and community. But I was filled with a sort of hopelessness that the teaching of English would never change.

I realized Tina was happy, and everyone was doing what, from their perspectives should be done in an English classroom, but I remained uncomfortable with my supervisory reports.

> While kids read, I stared out the window at the manicured school lawn with cornfields in the background...I wrote up a bland report for the university. Why shouldn't I write a fairly positive critique? The kids love her, and she does what English teachers are supposed to do. She's kind and genuinely interested in them as people. That's where my silences linger. On those triplicate forms. After all, she must fit in this semester. Everything depends on her assimilating to the culture...They'd never hire me, who wants to put them on a bus and take them to the inner city to show them other schools and other realities (9/16/94).

In the post-conference, I wanted to discover Tina's perceptions of the community as it played out in the school context so that we could discuss how to work within a community to create change. Since the school was all white, I wanted to focus on class rather than race issues and hope she would see in this particular context how systematically schools label and classify students. By discussing tracking in the school, I hoped we could begin a dialogue about class and its implications for schooling. Tina soon turned the discussion away from the ninth-grade English class I had just observed to the class that she was having trouble with, her 7th period tenth-grade English class. When I asked Tina whether this class was tracked, she said no. But with only 55 tenth-graders in the school, this 7th period class of 18 students had 14 labeled either as EEN--Exceptional Educational Needs--or "at risk." One group of six in the class had been labeled as problems for so long they were infamous. She said they came in as a group and said, "If you haven't heard about us, we're 'those kids'" (9/16/94).

Knowing that, in fact, there was a form of unacknowledged tracking in the school and aware of the negative implications for "low level" English students (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991; Oakes and Guiton, 1995), I became interested in the 7th period class and a bit protective of them, too. I worried that their curriculum was not a priority for the school and that "those kids" might not have parents who would or could question curricular decisions. If they needed an advocate, I hoped I could fill that role, but I could only do that through Tina. Eager to observe "those kids" in the 7th period English 10 class, I returned to Waitley, interested in how class and curricular issues would play out in a school that ostensibly had no tracking. I wondered if Tina could maintain traditional practices such as teaching vocabulary out of context, grammar exercises, and DOL in a class with such a history of failure. Actually, I assumed this class would resist her if she did, and perhaps saw in their potential resistance an opportunity for Tina to need my help in creating a

meaningful curriculum.

In our pre-conference meeting, Tina was enthusiastic about the class as well as her goals for them. She sensed that they needed and liked her and that earned them her devotion; however, her caring had no relationship to the curriculum. "She still loves it, they still love her, and her big curricular plans are to have them learn subject and verb"....(11/4/94).

I was perplexed by her devotion to "those kids" coupled with very traditional approaches to literacy learning. Somehow I assumed that when a student teacher cared about students, she would adopt practices that took their specific needs and interests into account. But no such equation was evident to Tina.

We spent a full two hours in a post-conference. Before we discussed the lesson Tina taught in 7th period, I wanted to explore Tina's understandings of this community and its class structure. As I watched and listened to these students, I had gotten the strong impression that they certainly understood their place in the class structure of the community and school. Tina, however, seemed not to. She assumed homogeneity rather than difference. When I asked Tina about any problems in town, she mentioned the kids living in foster homes there and the influx of new people in town drawn there by the many low paying jobs created by a new plant.

> Tina said some of the kids were complaining about the new kinds of kids in town. They didn't feel comfortable any more going to a Teen Center in town because of those new kids. I asked about which kids were complaining, and, of course, it was 'the studious kids, the ones from good families.' I asked her who the problem kids were and she said, "Perhaps it's just a coincidence, but they are the kids from the foster homes and the ones whose families have moved in to take the new jobs." It's amazing. Even without race as a differentiating factor, people still need to sort, fear, and hate. And even though I had talked about class factors, Tina just couldn't do that. The problem kids just happen to be those with less money. It's as though as a society we pretend class does not exist (11/4/94).

Trying to make a connection among community, tracking, and curriculum, I shifted our discussion to the seventh period class I had observed.

> Tina is not at all judgmental. But she's also not political. She will create good situations for kids by caring about them. But after letting them know that she cares, she'll teach them parts of speech. She loves kids and small communities. She just simply does not want to change schooling. I tried every strategy I know to get her to consider other ways to get at the sentence fragments, spelling, agreement, and other errors that "get" to her: reading/writing workshops, using students' own work as examples, all of those ways we know of, but she doesn't seem convinced...After she talked about doing a grammar unit, I asked "What do you really want to teach the kids in this class?' (11/4/94).

Her answers had little to do with reading and writing. Along with wanting to have students do homework, which most teachers in the school did not require, she wanted to teach the students self-esteem and positive classroom behavior such as looking at someone who is talking and not swearing or hitting each other. There seemed to be little connection between what she wanted to accomplish and the English curriculum she was following. One explanation is that Tina's primary teaching influence was not an English cooperating teacher, but rather Laurel, a special education teacher assigned to work with so many of the students in the seventh period class that the two women all but taught the class together. Laurel modeled a warm and caring persona with students which Tina adopted. But for an English teacher for this class and these students, caring of this kind was not enough.

In a last ditch effort to turn our conversation to literacy instruction, I asked Tina what she thought would motivate students to learn the grammar, vocabulary, and short stories she had planned for them.

> She responded that one student wrote down vocabulary words, but put down no definitions; instead, he had been writing what looked like a play with dialogue. I asked her if she could capitalize on that. She looked at me blankly, and I decided I'd better back off on a Friday afternoon at close to 5:00p.m. (11/4/94).

At this point, I ordered my options, the easiest of which was to do nothing further. No one at my university cared whether or not I worked with Tina on these issues. After all, as the content supervisor, I had already observed her more than was required. Certainly no one required me to take a critical stand on traditional English methods or to ask tough questions about the social make-up of the community, school expectations of these students, and how these shaped her view of what constituted quality literacy instruction for them. Maintaining the status quo was just fine with everyone, except me and my research colleagues, Pat and Dawn.

I turned to my correspondence with Dawn nd Pat to work through my concerns, and our exchange of letters helped me to take a new perspective on my work with Tina. Pat recalled a class she had similar to Tina's, one for which she had held low expectations "because I bought into the schools' curriculum designed for them--grammar, job applications, sentence combining" (11/13/94). She encouraged me to keep working toward reshaping Tina's literacy goals through constant supervisory support and an array of suggestions. Based on an article she had read about resistance and the pedagogy of possibility (Lindquist, 1994), Pat gave me a real insight about "not limiting her to resisting you, which locks you intellectually into a power struggle, but listening to

understand her for something other than resistance" (11/13/94).

Rather than challenge Tina to resist the status quo, I resolved to ask her *why* she made the choices she made and to frame suggestions in terms of teaching strategies under the assumption that Tina might be more willing to task risks if she thought such strategies might help her students learn more. We talked on the phone and talked over lunch. I was still "in her face," but in a much more productive way. In "listening to understand her," I began to see Tina making tremendous progress, not inspired by the university or her mentors at the school, but progress inspired by the students and their interests in reading, writing, and communicating.

Frustrated with the uninteresting short stories in their text, she assigned students in groups to go to the library, choose a short story, read it, lead class discussion on it, and create a writing prompt for the class. Delighted that she was moving toward a sense of project in her classroom and working form the students' interests, I asked Tina if I could observe the class. She gave a response I truly respected. "She told me since they would be leading discussion on these stories, she felt she had to ask them if they'd mind having an observer in the room," (12/9/94).

The students granted permission. Even though I knew the students were leading class discussion and despite my resolve to not assume resistance, I anticipated hard work in convincing Tina to risk alternatives to the traditional English curriculum she and the school followed for these "basic" students. I hoped that she would let students help her to engage them in reading and writing about people and situations that were meaningful to them. I had written to Dawn and Pat that it would have taken a miracle."Well I got my miracle. This class has totally changed--and they have converted her into the kind of teacher I hoped she would become," (12/16/94).

The groups had decided to assign their stories for the other groups to read outside of class, an event worth noting since in the culture of Waitley, most teachers did not assign homework. On the first day, no one had read the story. The presenting group was visibly disappointed because class time had to be used for reading, which meant that they did not have enough time for discussion or writing. From then on, the class did read the story each day outside of class, and the groups led discussions on "their" stories.

> These are kids who never did homework...Every group seems to up the ante a little. Now groups find time to get to the computer lab and bring in discussion questions or writing assignments typed up. The kids have totally taken over.
>
> Remember a month ago Tina said her goals were to teach them not to swear in class and not to hit each other.
>
> She is discovering an academic part of these students that they didn't reveal to her when she was teaching the traditional curriculum. Remember the kid who would

> not write out the definitions of the five vocab words and instead wrote dialogue? Well, she discovered he's been writing a short story this semester which, at 19 pages, is not yet done. And she had found out that others write too, but have always done so out of school and never talked about it (12/16/96).

I had witnessed what looked like a happy ending, but I'm always suspicious of happy endings and trained to critique them. How could a student teacher who had seemed resistant to any suggestions that were not traditional and control-oriented come to adapt her curriculum to suit her students, find their strengths, and take them further?

> I asked her what had caused such amazing growth in her students. She said, "They finally found something they like. They have ownership in it. They're talking about short stories and it's their friends teaching it. It's not dumb to read.' In fact, what they learned was that they let their friends down when they didn't read. And they're reading without the damn terminology!'
>
> She's come a long way. She took risks and disrupted her own patterns and the pattern of the whole school community in dealing with the most infamous group of tenth graders. And she did it, not because the university told her to, but because she wanted to help kids she loved, learn...I know this sounds almost trite. I know she'll have students for whom things won't work so well. And I'm sure that when she's tired and overworked, she'll fall back on traditional curriculum whether it's working well or not. But she'll always know that it is possible to engage kids by giving them some ownership. You can't unlearn that lesson (12/16/94).

Pleased with Tina's progress, I wanted to understand what prompted her growth. I was quite sure the university had not played much of a role in transforming her seventh period class, nor was it the influence of a cooperating teacher because she did not work closely enough with one. She certainly did not take any of my suggestions on the basis of my authority or influence. Still, I felt a bit proud--and simultaneously undeserving. In an attempt to understand my role in her development and probably to be reassured that my influence had made some difference, I explored the issue in my letters to Pat and Dawn. "In pushing, in accepting her resistance and coming back for another round, by being in her face, maybe I created a context in which the kids could sway her" (12/16/94). In response, Dawn further defined a supervisory context which can promote change, "You did keep pushing her and letting her know that you were watching, expecting changes in her practice, not allowing her to become comfortable with mediocrity" (1/9/95).

We began this letter-writing study to explore community norms in literacy instruction and to encourage our student teachers to risk more liberatory, more student-centered instruction. In Tina's case, it was not the specific questions I asked that led her to create a literacy community within her own classroom. My questions usually started with "why," involved student response,

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and encouraged options, but that is not unusual. Perhaps just the fact that questions *were* being asked--about the effects on students of school traditions and of tracking and grouping, about the effectiveness and appropriateness of traditional literacy practices on real kids in real communities--made a difference. Perhaps the sheer number of questions made a difference and the modeling of a questioning habit of mind. I might have asked the same questions in other contexts, but the answers would have been different because the students would have been different. Student teachers must find answers with the students in a particular community. And they can do that only when they themselves feel respected. In "listening to understand" (Lindquist, 1994) our students, we can find the questions that will resonate most meaningfully for them and for their students.

Conclusions

As we put it in our letters, we functioned as "positive irritants" to one another. We didn't allow each other the comfort of rhetoric without action. We didn't engage in reflection without accompanying changes in practice. It would have been quite easy to fall into the trap of *not* challenging literacy practices that ignore the cultural and social lives of students. These practices included: teaching the canon exclusively and without question, teaching the isolated bits and pieces of literacy in the form of vocabulary and grammar instruction, and relying on formulaic approaches to writing structure as writing instruction. We needed each other to keep us focused on the need for change in literacy instructional practices that had become so acceptable in the schools in which we worked. As we are challenged to do as qualitative researchers, we attempted to make the familiar strange through our collaborative critique.

We forced each other to describe our teaching, to articulate tensions and concerns, and to reach out for advice. This type of vulnerability would not have been possible within our academic departments or college-based teacher education programs. We created an alternative teacher education community in the course of this study, a community formed around a set of shared theoretical beliefs and political commitments concerning literacy instruction.

As we actively engaged in a critique of our own practices, we shared these reflective processes with our students. We stopped asking questions; students started to ask them. We stopped having overt political expectations of them and, instead, shared our own process of critique. They, in turn, started to formulate their own investigations and constructed their own possible courses of action. They needed us to support them as they started to see how the sociopolitical structures of the schools and communities in which they taught had limited their thinking about what was possible in their practices.

We began this study assuming our students had a lot to learn from us about relating

students' cultural identities to their instructional practice and about identifying and working to change undemocratic structures, such as tracking, present in most school communities. We initially saw our students as politically naive and as resistant to the concept of becoming agents of change within their school communities. Once we helped them to see the connections between their practices and students engagement in literacy practices, they took risks to find better solutions for their students. Our students weren't resisting us; they were lacking models for how to analyze instructional weakness and how to approach the complexities of instructional change.

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